

For Miami, 'this issue isn't going away' Handling of lead 'hot spots' on playgrounds divides community

**By Gary Garton
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MIAMI, Okla. — Lead contamination in the soil of two elementary school playgrounds in Miami is drawing conflicting responses from school officials, some parents and an environmental advocacy group.

The school board and administration take the stance that there is no problem, accepting the Environmental Protection Agency's assurances. But other voices have emerged in the community and on the school board itself.

Last year, EPA testing found concentrations of lead exceeding its "action level" of 500 parts per million on six Miami school properties, including playgrounds at Nichols and Washington schools.

Although Miami is not in the EPA's Tar Creek Superfund site, the agency agreed to have contractor C2HM Hill clean up the properties. After the work was done, two teachers at Nichols, Linda Tunnell and Vickie Buzzard, asked retired environmental engineer David Lovelace to conduct independent tests at Nichols and Washington. Lovelace said that of the four spots tested, two registered just over the 500 ppm level, one at 600 ppm and another at 800 ppm.

He contends that the contractor, Hill, used faulty testing methods. In response, the EPA said any lead left at the schools after the cleanup efforts this summer is not enough to present a health risk to students.

The school board accepted the EPA's explanation and had the temporary barriers around the "hot spots" removed.

Superintendent Bill Stephens said Monday that the district will remove any visible chat on the school properties and replace it with sod when the spring growing season arrives — an idea proposed by board president Ted Kaufman. "We are going to do that ourselves, even though I don't personally think there is a danger to the kids," Stephens said.

One board member says the EPA and its contractor should be held responsible for any additional cleanup. Clark McQuigg said he is acting

independently, asking U.S. Sen. Jim Inhofe to intervene with the EPA on the matter. "He heads the Senate committee that controls the EPA budget," McQuigg said. "If anyone could cut through the red tape and get something done, it would be him."

Pat Bridgewater taught at Nichols Elementary for 21 years, retiring with a medical disability in 1997, and now has a grandchild attending the school. She said last week: "I can't understand how the superintendent and board can in good conscience turn their backs on this when every reassurance we've given parents over the years was that we always had their children's education and well-being as our first priority.

"Now it looks like the bottom-line dollar is the main consideration. They don't even want to accept free retesting for fear it would find there is a problem and they'd have to pay to fix it."

The Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality has offered to retest the schoolyards at no expense to the district. Stephens has told the board he does not think additional testing is necessary.

Tracee Young, who has a daughter attending Nichols, said she was aware of the EPA cleanup because she asked about it, but she was never contacted by the school. She and district parents Tina Walker, Dana Shallenburger, Bethany Crosby, Erica Bain and Joyce Andersonn all said the school district did not keep them adequately informed about the lead problem.

"I would prefer to have known what was going on," Young said. All parents contacted by the Globe said they received no correspondence from the district. Stephens said a community meeting was held to address the matter.

Rebecca Jim, with the Local Environmental Action Demanded Agency Inc., said her group would take the issue directly to EPA officials. "We need to let them know this issue isn't going away, and people expect them to step up and do the right thing," she said.

Jim said her group will show EPA officials a report by environmental specialist Gary Lawley of Lubbock, Texas, that supports Lovelace's findings showing remaining lead "hot spots" on the playgrounds.

Lovelace gave the Globe a document that he says proves the EPA guidelines for soil testing were violated by its contractor.

Board member McQuigg said the district is "caught between a rock and a hard place. We have one expert on this side telling us one thing, and another expert over here telling us something else."

Another board member, Chuck Chesnut, said in a separate interview he is comfortable with the suggestion by Kaufman, the board president, that the district do some soil replacement itself. "Even if we did get the EPA and their contractor to come back, Lord knows how long that would take," he said.
